
Bringing Them In: Developing a Gaming Program for the Library

KAT WERNER

ABSTRACT

Children and teens are living in an increasingly digital world, and libraries struggle with ways to continue to be relevant to the younger generation. One way libraries can bring children and teen patrons in the doors is by offering gaming programs. These programs appeal to children and teens and can lead those patrons to become steady library users. This article includes information that any librarian can use to set up a gaming program at his or her library, including reviews of current video game systems and suggested video and board game purchases.

INTRODUCTION

Gaming is an important part of growing up. Children and teens today play a wide range of games, and video game systems are becoming an integral part of each household. To keep up with current technology, libraries can include gaming as part of their programming.

BACKGROUND

Six years ago, a parent asked our library if we had any time that her son could come and play *Yu Gi Oh*, a strategic trading card game that is also the subject of multiple *Manga* series, television shows, and movies. The patron's son had been playing the game at a local gaming store, but the store closed, so the son had nowhere to play. The head of the junior department and I discussed the request and decided to allow children and teen patrons a time each month to play *Yu Gi Oh* in our auditorium. We decided to open up this program because it tied in with literature in the library and because other libraries were starting to host gaming events. We chose the second Saturday of the month to host our gaming time. Dur-

ing this two-hour slot, we opened the auditorium up for junior patrons to come play, and served light refreshments. We advertised our gaming time with in-house flyers and bookmarks. Initial attendance for the program was approximately fifteen children and teens. Each season we would make up bookmarks to let patrons know of the upcoming gaming dates and made sure to include any special dates that coincided with school breaks. The original format for our gaming afternoons was to simply open the auditorium and provide an adult to supervise the children and teens as they played *Yu Gi Oh*. After a few months, the library purchased a *Yu Gi Oh* deck that patrons could check out to duel with if they did not have cards. These cards were marked with library stickers, and were counted each time a patron checked them out and then returned them.

After initial success, marked by a consistent turnout for each gaming afternoon, our library decided that we would expand our gaming afternoons by purchasing gaming equipment and games. When deciding what systems and games to purchase for the Benton Harbor Public Library, I talked to our teen patrons, wrote down their ideas, and then went to our local GameStop, a video game store, and met with the manager. I explained the purpose of our purchase, and he and I put together a collection of systems and games that would suit our needs.

By the first anniversary of our gaming program, attendance had doubled; at least thirty children and teens attended every month. After two years, we split the gaming afternoon into two programs: one is for children aged twelve and younger, and the other is for teens aged thirteen and older. We have scheduled library programs to coincide with the gaming afternoons to encourage cross-over attendance. My Teen Advisory Board (T.A.B.) meetings are held just before the teen gaming, and the children's book group meetings are held before children's gaming. We have also added a collection of board games to our gaming-afternoon selection.

Attendance at our gaming afternoons has held steady for the past four years. Teen attendance is between twenty and thirty each month, and children's attendance is between twelve and twenty.

Today, the teens show up to play *Yu Gi Oh* almost every Saturday. We do not open the auditorium, but they are allowed to play after noon in the Teen Department. Teen participation in the Summer Reading Program has increased from fifty participants five years ago to over one hundred in 2011.

As we were developing our gaming programs, we noted that other libraries were also developing gaming programs. Members of the YALSA (Young Adult Library Services Association) mailing list started sharing information about gaming afternoons in different libraries. I was able to offer advice to these librarians, especially about gaming selection and tournament experience. The goal of this article is to collect and share that advice about starting a gaming program with other library staff.

STARTING A GAMING PROGRAM

When starting a gaming program at the library, it is best to decide what gaming will be available and what ages will be able to participate in the program. Our library originally started with a single gaming program where children and teens could come and play card games or video games. The main gaming options available for libraries to offer are card, video, board, and role-playing.

Card Games

Traditional card games such as *Uno*, *Old Maid*, and *Crazy 8's* are usually easier to understand and play much faster than *Yu Gi Oh* or other collectable card games, but collectable card games can draw an audience of dedicated players seeking a place to meet. The Benton Harbor Library has a set of *Uno* cards that is available at all times in the Junior Department and is included in our selection during the gaming afternoon. Most children and teens know how to play the traditional card games that we offer, but staff is available to play through and explain the game if any children or teens need the help.

Yu Gi Oh and *Magic the Gathering* are two collectable card games that children and teens play. These games often take longer and are much more complex than traditional card games. The Benton Harbor Public Library purchased a *Yu Gi Oh* deck for patron use. This deck came with a rule book that patrons may also use. The T.A.B. has set up an agreed-upon set of rules for *Yu Gi Oh* tournaments, and before any tournament takes place, I ask for a teen volunteer to help run the program. This volunteer is not allowed to participate in the tournament and is only allowed to judge if the rest of the T.A.B. consent. The library originally did not allow trading, but now teens trade *Yu Gi Oh* cards.

A member of the YALSA list mentioned that her teens play *Fluxx*, a thirty-minute card game, and the Benton Harbor Public Library has purchased this game to add to our collection. *Fluxx* comes in many different themes, including *Pirate* and *Zombie*. Other modern card games that might be appropriate for the library are *Munchkin* and *Apples to Apples*.

Board Games

Just like there are classic and modern card games, there are also classic and modern board games. Some popular classic board games are chess, checkers, *Memory*, and *Sorry*. The library can offer these games, along with new board games like *Blokus*, *Banagrams*, *Scene It*, and *Catch Phrase*. One way to learn about new board games is to visit a local board game group to try newer games; this can also help the library recruit volunteers and new members.

When purchasing board games for use in a library gaming program, focus on games that can be completed quickly, this keeps patrons from getting bored or being unable to finish their game during the program. For

children's board games, we've used parenting magazines' review lists and have purchased board games that are related to children's books. There is a matching game based on Eric Carle's *Very Hungry Caterpillar* book, a *Don't Let the Pigeon Drive the Bus* game based on the pigeon books by Mo Willems, and an assortment of games based on H. A. Ray's *Curious George* character. Board games may be purchased by the library or accepted through donations. A majority of our board games at the Benton Harbor Public Library have been donated by patrons. Before we put out any board games, staff members play through each game to make sure that we know how to play well enough to help patrons. We use more board games than other types of games during our children's gaming afternoons and usually offer four or five board game options during each session. Each game is set up on its own table. Two or three staff members run each of our gaming afternoons and are available to play with and teach games to patrons.

Role-playing Games

Role-playing games are storytelling games where each player takes on a character and one player sets up the scenarios and challenges for the other players to encounter. Some role-playing games are *Dungeons and Dragons* and *Vampire: The Masquerade*. Role-playing games may require more time and someone with knowledge of the game to oversee or run the adventure. These games can also span multiple gaming sessions and require commitment by staff and patrons. *Dungeons and Dragons* games take place during different campaigns, which can take months of four-hour (or longer) gaming sessions. Some libraries will have a staff member or volunteer take on the role of the facilitator for the adventures. This way, even if the players are different, the facilitator can ensure that the story remains consistent. If patrons are not willing to keep coming back for each gaming session, the campaign can go on, but someone else may have to play that patron's character.

Video Games

Video games are a popular choice for any gaming afternoon. To draw a variety of patrons, a library interested in offering a gaming program should have at least one video game console to use during the program. If the library needs to purchase a gaming system, the current set of gaming consoles to choose from are the Xbox 360, PlayStation 3, and Nintendo Wii. Each system has its own advantages and disadvantages.

Of these consoles, the Nintendo Wii is the most accessible for all ages and the least expensive. One advantage to the Nintendo Wii is that it can play Nintendo GameCube games and use the GameCube controllers. A disadvantage of the Wii is that, according to Morris (2011), Nintendo will not be releasing any more major titles for this system. Instead, they will be focusing on the Wii U, their next-generation system. This is not a large problem for libraries, though: the focus on gaming in libraries is not on

the newest system and games but more on providing a variety of quality games to patrons.

The Xbox 360 is also a popular system; it has a large array of games. If there is a strong Internet infrastructure at the library, a Xbox Live Gold subscription will allow the library to download free demos, inexpensive games, and game updates. Xbox Live Gold costs \$60 for a year's subscription.

When playing games online, players will be matched against other players via the Internet. Microsoft has little control over what players say while they are playing, and most of these players will not be in a library setting. There is a system for reporting players for abusive language and cheating, but many players do not follow the code-of-conduct rules. There can be a lot of swearing, especially with first-person shooter (FPS) games. If the library chooses to allow patrons to play online, the librarian can change the settings in the game to mute all other players and avoid this problem. Another route is to have several Xboxes and network them together to create a private space to play only with each other.

Xbox also has the Kinect, a supplemental camera piece that allows players to play the games without a controller. This is similar to the motion sensor used on the Nintendo Wii-mote, but it is more sophisticated. The Kinect is a fun device, but it requires a large space and ample lighting. It has the advantage of not needing a controller, so the Kinect can be set up and left in a way that a game system with controllers that might be stolen cannot.

The PlayStation 3, typically the most expensive of the three consoles, can also be used as a Blu-ray player, and it is free to subscribe to the PlayStation Network, which can allow the library to purchase inexpensive downloadable games. Both the Xbox 360 and the Playstation 3 can play earlier-generation console games with varying degrees of success. All three gaming companies are working on their next-generation platforms, which are anticipated to come out in the next year or two.

Most systems and games can be purchased used from a reputable gaming store, although some games do have exclusive content that is only available when purchased new. Used games can be a great investment of library dollars; sports games in particular drop in price quickly because many companies release an updated version every year. Patrons can be polled to see what systems are most popular in the area, and local game shops may donate equipment or provide special pricing for the library. Be aware that video games have age ratings, which are very similar to MPAA ratings for movies. Video games may be rated E for Everyone, E 10 for ages ten and up, T for Teen, or M for Mature. Depending on the library's policies, librarians may not want to purchase M-rated games. Just like with card and board games, video games should be chosen that have short rounds or play modes or that allow multiple players. This will allow many

participants to engage with the game in a short period of time. Here is a suggested core list of games for each library to purchase: *Naruto Clash of Ninja* (any version), *Mario Kart*, *Mario Baseball* or *Soccer*, *Wii Sports*, *Forza*, *Madden* (any year, does not have to be the most current), *Tekken* or *Soul Caliber*, *Disney Adventures*, *Just Dance*, *Super Smash Brothers*, and *Plants vs. Zombies*.

GAMING TOURNAMENTS

One of the most popular gaming program activities that we have at the Benton Harbor Public Library is tournaments. We hold tournaments multiple times a year. Tournaments add excitement to the program and can be used as fund-raisers or to raise awareness of the program. It is important for library staff to work with participants to agree on rules for the tournament before the tournament starts, as competition can cause tempers to flare if rules are changed during the event. The library staff will have to play the role of referee and adjudicator in a tournament, especially if prizes and titles are on the line.

At the Benton Harbor Public Library, we have run tournaments with an assortment of games. Fighting, sports, racing, and any game that allows players to go head to head with an obvious winner make for the easiest tournaments. Some games we have used for tournaments include *Naruto Clash of Ninja*, *Mario Kart*, *Wii Tennis*, *Just Dance*, and *Soul Caliber*. We have a rule that any tournament game must be provided by the library, and it must be played on a library system. This makes for an even playing field.

There are different ways that the library can facilitate the gaming tournament. One method is through programs such as *Tournament Bracket Builder* that will produce a tournament bracket once the librarian fills entrants' names into the program. Another method is to randomly choose entrant names out of a bucket for pairing up. Another quick method is to take the list of people who have signed up and pair them from top to bottom. If there are an uneven number of players, the librarian can randomly select a name of a player to get a bye into the next round before making the pairings. While some participants may complain about the bye system, byes are a normal part of tournament play.

Most tournaments we conduct are double elimination. Once someone has one loss, he or she moves to the loser's bracket. If he or she loses again then he or she is out of the tournament. For someone from the loser's bracket to win the tournament, he or she must beat the final person in the winner's bracket twice.

Some head-to-head games allow for four players to play at once. When we use these games in a tournament, we assign points based on who comes in first, second, third, and fourth. First place is awarded four points, second gets three points, third gets two points, and fourth place gets one point. After two rounds of place, the top eight (or another multiple of

four) players move on; ideally, at least half of the players will move on each round if the time allotted for the tournament will allow that. If any players are tied, then they face off against one another for the remaining spaces. This continues until there are four people left, then those four battle for final place standing.

Some libraries require preregistration for tournaments; others let anyone enter. Prizes can include gift cards to local gaming stores, candy, or other small incentives. Depending on the relationship with the local gaming stores, the stores may be willing to put up flyers for your tournament, and they may provide prizes as well. These partnerships with other business in the community can provide support, advice, and marketing. This will let gamers who might not be familiar with the library know about the event and may bring new patrons to the program.

IMPACT OF GAMING AT THE BENTON HARBOR LIBRARY

Gaming programs in libraries can have a profound effect. This program appeals to adolescent males, a population that is often difficult to bring into the library. Jaleel McNeal, fifteen, said (of the Game On program at the Benton Harbor Public Library). "The Game On program is a fun, positive thing to do and that's what youth needs." Gaming programs keep teens occupied and give them something positive to do. The gaming afternoons at the Benton Harbor Public Library have completely changed the Teen Department. A majority of our T.A.B. and Teen Book Club are made up of teens who started coming to our gaming afternoons. These teens also volunteer for children's programs.

We have restructured our Summer Reading Program to also include rewards for teens who come to programs (including Game On), and this has encouraged teens who might not normally participate in the reading program to sign up. Our summer reading program is based on rewarding teens for the amount of time spent reading library materials, and for the past two summers, the teens who have logged the most hours have both been gaming afternoon participants. Providing this program to teens has made the library more accessible and inviting. The teens feel that we really want them here, and in turn they want to be a part of the library.

PLANNING AND ASSESSING THE IMPACT OF GAMING PROGRAMS

To implement a gaming program at the library, the first thing to do is determine what space is best for this event. Gaming programs can be loud. Each gaming system and accompanying television will make noise, and this program attracts teenage boys, who may have a hard time keeping down the noise. If there is a separate room for programming, that is the ideal setup. Here at the Benton Harbor Public Library, we have an audi-

torium that is across the hall from our Junior Department. We can close the door to contain noise from the patrons and the games. If a suitable closed-off space is not available, then consider hosting a lock-in and offering gaming at that event or focus on quieter tabletop games.

Once a space has been found, the librarian should involve the target audience in choosing systems and games. If the program is targeting teens, then if there is a teen advisory board at the library, they should be polled; if not, a survey could be put out for all teen patrons. To get the community involved, librarians can ask for donations of board or video games and video game system controllers.

When we first launched our gaming program, we made up in-house flyers and bookmarks with the dates, times, and a small description of the event to advertise to patrons. We eventually were able to put up flyers in a local game store. Librarians can also contact local schools and see if the schools will hand out flyers or bookmarks about gaming programs. The bookmarks worked especially well for us at the start to get patrons acquainted with the program, but, eventually, word-of-mouth is what got more people to attend.

One method to assess the impact of teen-focused game programming at the library is to look at circulation statistics. The librarian can find out the teen department circulation from the last year and find out the current number of teen library cards before any gaming programming is started. If there is a Teen Summer Reading Program each summer, the librarian should get a count of how many teens participate.

As the gaming program grows and draws a regular attendance, then the librarian can review the Teen Department circulation statistics and number of library cards and compare those numbers to the baseline data. While getting a successful program going is something librarians strive for, we really want people to stay and use other library services after the program is finished. Reviewing the yearly statistics will help the librarian see if circulation is going up due to the programming. If the library's system has the capacity to provide daily circulation statistics, the librarian should check whether circulation on the day of the gaming program is higher than on other days. Another method of assessment is to talk to attendees of the gaming program to see if they have changed their library-use behavior since being involved with the program.

CHALLENGES

The biggest challenge that the Benton Harbor Public Library has faced with our gaming afternoons has been theft. We do not have any theft-detection system or a video-surveillance system in our library, so we are very limited in how much we can protect our items. Games have been stolen most frequently during gaming afternoons, and on occasion some-

one's *Yu Gi Oh* cards or other personal items are stolen. We have tried having teens check all bags and coats at the door, but this has not always worked. The library has resorted to canceling programs for a few weeks of time if any theft occurs and ensuring that patrons know about this possibility through appropriate signage. We have also started keeping all games that are not being used behind a locked door and allowing only staff members to change games on request. Another expensive option is to install locking equipment for the gaming systems or purchasing locked cabinets for the game system with holes cut for controller wires and ventilation, much like they have at gaming and electronics stores. Also, if a library uses an RFID or other similar system, then all games, controllers, and gaming accessories should be tagged.

Another challenge is that many of the newer games rely on downloadable content; therefore, a library without an Internet connection may struggle with a buggy game. Publishers have realized the money they are losing through the game resale market, so they are developing new methods that require players to purchase a new copy of a game to access downloadable content. Many consoles are being influenced by the popularity of games on iPads, cell phones, and other hand-held devices. This uncertain future could pose problems to gaming in libraries eventually, but, for now, investing in traditional systems and used games is a viable option that will serve any library for many years.

Parents may challenge the games that are made available during the gaming afternoons, although this has not yet happened in our library. The Benton Harbor Public Library offers the game *Soul Caliber* during our teen programs. We have chosen this fighting game and *Tekken* instead of the more well-known game *Mortal Kombat*. Most *Mortal Kombat* games are rated M, so that rating alone has kept it and other M-rated games out of our collection. The name is well recognized by parents, though, as a game that is violent, so to avoid challenges, we have opted to purchase other fighting games. The same library policies that cover the use and showing of R-rated movies can be used to cover the use of M-rated games.

The best resource against any parental challenges to a teen or children's gaming event is to first have a strong collection-development policy in place. Librarians should have a clear gaming-selection policy before going forward with a gaming program. This policy will define the requirements a game must meet to be purchased by the library. In this policy, the library will state any age-rating restrictions it has chosen for games within the collection. This will also be the place where the library states if any reviews are required for a game to be selected for purchase. If someone challenges a games inclusion in the library's collection, this policy can be used to help explain why the game was chosen, and any reviews can be used to back up the game purchase.

FOR FURTHER READING

Throughout my life, I have always enjoyed playing video games. I have tried to keep current, and my household owns multiple gaming systems. When putting together the gaming collection for the library, I used mostly input from myself, my teens, and my contacts at our local gaming store. Not every librarian setting up a gaming afternoon will have gaming as a hobby, so here are some sources that can be used to create or expand a gaming collection.

- IGN (www.IGN.com) is a definitive source in game reviews. The site reviews all major releases, has lists of top-selling games (compiled and broken down by system), focuses on up-coming titles, and has different parts of the site focusing on each gaming system. There is also a search feature that allows one to look up almost any game. This site will be the most help to any librarian who is setting up or currently running gaming programs at the library. IGN is a free resource, but there are ads on the page.
- Most librarians are familiar with *School Library Journal* for the publication's book reviews. *School Library Journal* includes a Technology section on their website, and this section has a gaming subsection. Here, librarians can find academic reviews of board and video games. *School Library Journal* is a respected review journal, and if any game that is recommended by them is challenged, the librarian will have a better time defending the inclusion of it in his or her collection. *School Library Journal* is available in print or online at www.schoollibraryjournal.com; while many of the articles can be read for free, librarians and others may also subscribe to get the full benefits of this publication.
- Information and rules about *Dungeons and Dragons*, *Magic the Gathering*, and *Yu Gi Oh* can be found at the publishers' websites. Wizards of the Coast produces both *Dungeons and Dragons* and *Magic the Gathering*. The *Dungeons and Dragons* and *Magic the Gathering* portions of Wizards of the Coast's website each include a section for those that are new to each game. These sections have information for people who are learning to play. The *Dungeons and Dragons* section includes instructions on how to play and lists of what to purchase (Wizards of the Coast, *Dungeons and Dragons*, 2012). The *Magic the Gathering* section includes a downloadable PDF of *Magic the Gathering* rules (Wizards of the Coast, *Magic the Gathering*, 2012). There are event listings where players can meet to play these games, and libraries with a regular *Dungeons and Dragons* or *Magic the Gathering* event can list their events for free.
- Konami's *Yu Gi Oh* website (<http://www.yugioh-card.com>) also includes information on how to play their card game. Scrolling down their game-play portion of the site finds an official rulebook for download, lists of limited and banned cards, and links to rules for tournament play.

- A last resource for gaming information is *Parenting* magazine. This magazine is in print but also has a searchable website (www.parenting.com). The biggest advantage of this resource is that it focuses on games for young children. A quick search through the site for “games” found a link to an article for the best Wii games for kids. The Benton Harbor Public Library has used this resource when considering games for our children’s gaming afternoon because most well-known games are aimed at tweens and older.

CONCLUSION

Including gaming programs in libraries helps keep libraries current. Libraries often include puzzles, puppets, and other toys for children, and by expanding to include gaming, libraries can appeal to an even larger audience. Teens are an at-risk group that can benefit greatly from becoming regular library patrons. Gaming at the Benton Harbor Public Library has allowed us to reach out to the teen male population in our community and has helped turn many of these young men into regular library patrons and dedicated readers.

The future of gaming looks to be changing drastically. Hand-held devices are starting to challenge the traditional gaming system market, and more often games are becoming download-only or require online codes to play. These changes will mostly affect the used-game market, which may make gaming more costly in the future, but the popularity of inexpensive downloadable games on hand-held devices is also going to affect the cost of new games.

Libraries need to stay relevant. Libraries are here to allow patrons access to information, even if that information may seem trivial to librarians. Gaming programs can teach children and teens social skills, introduce them to technology, and start the process of helping them love the library. One of the most important things to remember when starting gaming programs at a library is to be flexible. The gaming afternoons at the Benton Harbor Public Library started for *Yu Gi Oh* only. While *Yu Gi Oh* is still played here, it is no longer the focus of the gaming afternoons. We have let our patrons help shape the focus of our programs, and we’ve adapted over time to their changing needs. The most successful gaming programs are those that will change and grow with the patrons who attend them.

REFERENCES

- Meredith Corporation. (2011). Board approval: 7 classic board games for kids. *Parents Magazine*. Retrieved February 15, 2013, from <http://www.parents.com/fun/games/educational/classic-kidsboard-games/?page=4>
- Morris, C. (2011). Holiday Gaming Stinkers: The Must Not Haves. Message posted to [http://games.yahoo.com/blogs/plugged in/holiday-gaming-stinkers-must-not-haves-190510267.html](http://games.yahoo.com/blogs/plugged-in/holiday-gaming-stinkers-must-not-haves-190510267.html)
- Wizards of the Coast. (2012). *Dungeons & Dragons*. Retrieved February 15, 2013, from <http://www.wizards.com/DnD/Default.aspx>

Wizards of the Coast. (2012). *Magic the Gathering*. Retrieved February 15, 2013, from <http://www.wizards.com/Magic/Summoner/>

Kat Werner is the head of Teen Services at the Benton Harbor Public Library. She has been featured in Hotline and written for VOYA (Voices of Youth Advocates) magazines. She has used her fascination with pop culture and technology to create and maintain a thriving graphic novel collection and video game program at her library. When she is not working, Kat enjoys her time playing video games, watching movies, and reading. Kat also has a regular podcast in which she discusses movies and other pop culture related items. She recently graduated with a BS in Information Science and is pursuing her master's degree in library science from Wayne State University.